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## Fifty Years of Contemporary Spanish Poetry (1939-1989)

### Abstract

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### Keywords

contemporary Spanish poetry, Spanish poetry, poetry, poetry since the Civil War (1936-1939), overview, generational schematization, expository, exposition, methodology, generational methodology, critique, literary critique

## Fifty Years of Contemporary Spanish Poetry (1939-1989)

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Translated by Peter Browne

The study of Spanish poetry since the Civil War (1936-1939) has commonly been undertaken following a generational scheme or system. This methodology possesses a two-fold advantage. First, there is its practical usefulness, although this could almost be considered a didactic simplification with the risks that every simplification implies. The other is the fact that it allows us to observe the successive appearance of new (young) groups of poets, as well as the dialectic which is established among these. The disadvantages of the method, from a contrary perspective, are even greater; we shall draw attention to these throughout our study. Nonetheless we shall follow the generational schematization, but with the sole purpose of maintaining our pace and expository rhythm. At each point in this scheme we shall attempt to underscore its insufficiencies and the corrections that these necessitate. My choice of this rather peculiar expositive approach may appear ironic; I employ a definite methodology (in this case generational) and at the same time undermine it, defeat its intentions, and point out its limitations. But as the purpose that guides me is at once historical and critical, I believe this counterpoint is not totally inadequate.

At the conclusion of the Civil War, the cultural horizons that could have favored a free and fruitful poetic expression could not have been more impoverished. On the one hand, the majority of the great figures who represented all the previous poetry in our century (from *modernismo* to the inter-war period) and who could have served as guides or mentors were now either dead or in exile. The listing of those

absent figures (models either to follow or to react against) is overwhelming: Miguel de Unamuno, Antonio Machado, Juan Ramón Jiménez, León Felipe, José Moreno Villa, Pedro Salinas, Jorge Guillén, Federico García Lorca, Emilio Prados, Luis Cernuda, Rafael Alberti, to name just a few. And of course in many cases the circulation and reading of their work was also prohibited. One young and promising poet, Miguel Hernández, an active combatant of the Republic, was condemned to prison where he died in 1942; the diffusion of his work was also silenced. The action of *franquista* censorship—which was indeed to exert its castrating vigilance intermittently for several decades—was being exercised at that time with greater virulence than ever. Nevertheless, a number of timid strategies (proceeding from the new poets of those first post-war years, between 1939 and 1944) were undertaken to keep the practice of poetry alive during this dark period.

Among such strategies, perhaps only one is worthy of mention in this survey: the return to a type of formalist neoclassicism, sustained by the lesson of the most “pure” of 16th Century Spanish poets, Garcilaso de la Vega. One cannot deny the high degree of beauty and perfection of expression still to be found among the hundreds of sonnets concentrating exclusively on religious and amorous topics that were published during those years. Nevertheless, as can be seen throughout its organ *Garcilaso*, linked as it is with the significant name of José García Nieto, the production of this group of poets (whose self-designation, viewed from our present, seems sadly ironic: “Juventud Creadora” [“Creative Youth”]) is characteristically full of mannerisms, fundamentally evasive—one is almost tempted to say irrealist. Its tendencies represented moral and aesthetic presuppositions that were to prompt an inevitable and healthy reaction.

Such a reaction was not long in coming. It came to the fore on two apparently dissimilar fronts, which were eventually to converge in intent and outcome. One of these fronts was composed precisely and with rigorous simultaneity of two of the four elder poets of the pre-Civil War period who had remained in Spain: Dámaso Alonso and Vicente Aleixandre (the other two were Manuel Machado and Gerardo Diego). In the year 1944, Dámaso Alonso stirred the extenuated and necessarily faint-hearted Spanish poetic climate with his book *Hijos de la ira* (*Children of Wrath*). Although astutely subtitled *Diario íntimo* (*Intimate Diary*), this book (which opens with a dramatically alerting verse: “Madrid es una ciudad de más de un

millón de cadáveres" ["Madrid is a city of more than a million corpses"]) presented, in a diction only apparently realist and even virulent, an existentially situated collection of poetry as well as a cry of rebellion against the world's injustice. This same year Vicente Aleixandre brought to the poetic scene an emotive attention to human living (although beneath a mythic aura and a visionary expression) with his book *Sombra del Paraíso* (*Shadow of Paradise*); here the poet also confronts us with existential reflection and metaphysical speculations on the human condition. Thus there opened pathways which were soon to be followed by a new generation of Spanish poets. These two books were not equal or parallel in their influence. The historical reasons for this are easily understood. Aleixandre's work was to have a more immediate repercussion because of the characteristics I mentioned above. The violent "tremendismo" of *Hijos de la Ira* was destined to exert its influence at a somewhat later moment when an aggressive and direct mode of expression would prove itself indispensable to social and political poetry. It should be noted that both volumes were written in extensive free verse, in an almost Biblical fashion. This revealed an obvious first sign of reaction against *neogarcilasista* formalism.

This would be our first departure from the type of generational scheme that has been previously applied without the indispensable nuances. With the two books of Aleixandre and Alonso there was introduced into post-Civil War poetry an atmosphere of *realism*, *historicism*, and *existential consciousness*—some of the traits that were to become essential to the definition of this poetry. This thematic orientation was introduced by two poets who had actively taken part in the very different aesthetics of the previous generation (this is especially true of Aleixandre).

The other front of the reaction against the limiting formalism of *neogarcilasismo* was forged in a provincial capital: the city of León. Here in the same year there was founded the journal *Espadaña*, which was to exert a significant influence on the development of poetry in this period. Its directors, Victoriano Crémer and Eugenio de Nora, launched from its pages a shout of protest "against the four walls and against the fourteen iron bars of the sonnet." The double implication is obvious: the prison walls symbolize *franquista* repression, while the iron bars represent the limitations of a rigorous formalism. Thus there was posited a conception of poetic activity radically distanced from both the purism of the inter-war period and the thematic asepsis of

*neogarcilasismo*. The gesture of *Espadaña* had an undeniable political connotation: it was the baptism of what only shortly afterwards was to become a tendency under the name of social poetry.

Nonetheless, in the long term this gesture was to have an even greater impact. There came into favor a new and wider thematics; this has been spoken of, with a greater or lesser degree of accuracy, as a “rehumanization” of poetry. An analogous direction had been ventured in a way by the surrealists of the thirties, although on the basis of a very different—and more obscure—lexical modulation. A cursory account of the thematics of the 40s would have to include the hunger for God, an existential consciousness, and a denunciation of the lack of liberty and of physical hunger. In contrast with the hermeticism of surrealism and the minority aesthetics attributed to Juan Ramón Jiménez and his disciples, one now sought a language that would be immediately communicative. This language was directed towards that “immense majority,” to which Blas de Otero, whose work was yet to be initiated at this time, was very soon to direct himself with the greatest explicitness.

A new orientation in themes (in relation with inter-war period aesthetics) and clarification of expression would seem to have been the new goals of poetry. This points once more to the need for revision of the generational system as it has commonly been applied to poetry written in Spain during these years. Shortly before the Civil War, that is during the brief duration of the Republic (1931–36), the young poets of the day had directed their steps towards similar objectives, albeit their stance was more intimist and less political. Contradicting the separation drawn since the time of symbolism between poetry and life, the young poets of the thirties had been determined to incorporate into their poetry the expression of temporal experience, that is the immediate plane of existence. As a consequence of this basic orientation, they recovered themes which had not been at all foreign to the *noventaiochista* phase of modernism but which had been placed in parentheses by the purist rigor of the generation of 27, especially during its initial phase of cohesion while still under the tutelage of Jiménez. Thus once again there circulated themes such as amorous intimacy, daily and familiar happenings, a preoccupation with religion, a concern for one’s country and, although more rarely, social and political anxiety. It was of course natural that they should have attempted to convey this program through language that would be more open while less metaphorical and subtle. Thereby they sought to

carry out fully the motto of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (although certainly not the Vallejo of *Trilce*): "Creators of images, return the word to men."

These poets comprise the debated "generation of 36": Miguel Hernández, Juan Gil-Albert, Luis Felipe Vivanco, Leopoldo Panero, Luis Rosales, Dionisio Ridruejo, Carmen Conde, Ildefonso Manuel Gil, José Luis Cano, Germán Bleiberg—those poets who could however publish little during those five brief years of the Republic. Soon war broke out, and with it there came a division. With the close of the war some of its probable members initially allied themselves with the victorious party (that is, the *franquistas*), which of course did not earn for them much general sympathy. For such reasons these poets have generally been ignored or overlooked in the anthologies or histories dealing with post-Civil War poetry. What is certain is quite contrary: the greatest and most representative portion of their work (with the natural exception of that of Miguel Hernández) corresponds to the decades of the 40s and 50s and beyond.

Indeed the generic labels that have been proposed to define the production of these poets as a whole—"poetry of existence," "poetry of temporal experience," "existential realism"—are quite in line with the general tenor of the first post-war period which began around 1944. Thus the names and works of these young poets of the Republic must certainly be granted their rightful place in the history of post-Civil War poetry. Even if we apply the traditional measure of fifteen years, which usually attempts a chronological delimitation of a generation on the basis of its members' birth dates, the majority of the above-mentioned poets could be grouped quite consistently with those we are about to discuss. Was there really a Generation of 36? Or to formulate this question from another vantage point: had not the inclination towards a poetics that departed decidedly from that practiced in high Spanish modernity (that is to say, in the so-called Generation of 27) been initiated *prior* to the appearance of what is commonly accepted as the first post-war generation? This point calls for revision on the part of historians of contemporary Spanish poetry.

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Having made these corrections (which both are and are not retrospective), we must now continue with that chronological discourse to which we have submitted. We must return to that crucial



year of 1944. Beginning with this year there began to appear the first volumes of poets who on account of their age had published nothing before the War. For this reason they have been considered the integrators of that first post-war group to which we have referred. Viewed in its entirety, it would appear that what predominates in the initial lyric production of these new poets is an energetic drive to realism (both thematic and expressive). Nevertheless, it should be understood that this general realism was actually directed in three specific and well-differentiated courses, which at times were superimposed in a single author. Therefore our illustrations must be taken only as relative guidelines. These three courses are the following: 1) a reflective realism (metaphysical and at times religious), albeit felt more from a stance of anguished emotion than from that of reflection proper, in poets such as the early Blas de Otero, Carlos Bousoño, Vicente Gaos, and José María Valverde; 2) an existential realism (personal and directly experienced) in José Hierro and Rafael Morales; finally 3) a historical realism (social criticism and engagement with the country's total situation), in poets such as the second Otero, as well as in several well-known pieces by José Hierro, Gabriel Celaya, Angela Figuera, Victoriano Crémer, and Eugenio de Nora.

This third orientation, which converted engagement and social thematics into an overall tendency and dogma, was destined to attain the greatest relief and continuity (indeed, it survived well into the decade of the 60s). It was produced in such a conspicuous fashion that, here with a wide margin of error, the first generation came to be almost exclusively identified with social poetry. In any case, when we examine the samples submitted by the nine authors included by Francisco Ribes in his *Antología consultada de la joven poesía española* (*Consulted Anthology of the Young Spanish Poetry*, 1952), which is the source of all the names mentioned above, we become aware of the fact that an aesthetic of realist concreteness is what predominates in this group's general poetics, motivations and language. The only clear exception was Carlos Bousoño's answer to this question in this same anthology. Social poetry—as should be duly acknowledged—was an inevitable and morally noble reality: it was nothing less than the pained response of consciences rightly engaged with the plight of a people subject to the oppressive mechanisms of social injustice, meted out full-handedly by the dictatorial power of the Spain of the time.

From an artistic viewpoint this response served poetry poorly, however. The “social poem” was reduced to the plain transmission



of ideas and of worn-out watchwords. And language (with the exemplary exception of Blas de Otero, who was always a great master of the word) reached its lowest ebb in the history of contemporary Spanish poetry. The motto "poetry is communication," proposed by the master Aleixandre and theorized by Carlos Bousoño during these same years (we are already in the decade of the 50s), was interpreted poorly by many social poets. Hence these words were generally taken as meaning that the function of poetry was simply to transmit without difficulties a content or a message to an (improbable) reader. It was also assumed that this message should be laden with the ethical, social and political demands that the times required. And as a result (note that I have written: *without difficulties*) one imagined that a poem should be written in the most simple, accessible, and obvious language possible. The predominance of this almost authoritarian attitude (whose true place of honor would correspond to the history of civil consciousness in Spain rather than to the history of its literature) had the worst of consequences. Indeed this attitude had the effect of a moral censor and inevitably made an impact on the artistic level. This censorship, which was exercised not by the Regime but rather by those opposed to it, was to stifle or silence other forms of contemporary poetic experience that did not happen to bear the stamp of realist and engaged writing.

Nevertheless, those experiences did exist, even if at the time they were marginal or even ill-fitting. One of them was *postismo*, which arose around 1945 and from which emerged the highly personal voice of Carlos Edmundo de Ory. The *postistas* good-humoredly opposed the simplicity, obviousness, and dead-pan seriousness of the dominant poetic vein with a will to artistic experimentation and with ludic and prankish exercises not far removed from the spirit of the old vanguards (that is, from the spirit of the *ismos*; hence its name: *postismo*). Another of the "episodes" that were marginal at that time was that poetry oriented towards both intimism and aesthetic and cultural rigor which the group (and journal) *Cántico*, centered in the Andalusian city of Córdoba, had been attempting to project since 1947. Ricardo Molina and Pablo García Baena are perhaps the most important poets associated with this movement. A third attempt to react against the dominant realism (and with which it was in fact simultaneous) was represented by a certain countercurrent surrealism practiced among others by Miguel Labordeta, Alejandro Gabino-Carriedo and Juan Eduardo Cirlot.

All of the poets named in the preceding paragraph are rigorously contemporary with those mentioned above: hence they would be seen as belonging to the same generation. Thus in this zone of contemporary Spanish poetry we are confronted with another obstacle for the customary application of the generational method. It is of course true that some of these marginal experiences have on occasion been re-evaluated in recent years. But this does not suffice: it is necessary for such experiences to be definitively incorporated into the chronological stratum to which they correspond and come to occupy their proper place within the established canon. Until this is done, it will not be possible to perceive this same generation's overall richness and contrastive variety of nuance and aesthetic postures. The common and indeed still prevalent impression that early post-war poetry was universally marked and artistically impoverished by the *fatum* of unswerving social engagement stands in need of correction.

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Nonetheless, at that time the situation was not at all viewed from such an integral perspective. On the contrary, the weight of social poetry was total if not oppressive. This had its implications: the proscription of intimacy, the over-evaluation of objective or ideological contents, the conditioned poverty of writing on the whole. Consequently, a reaction against this precarious and amputating state of affairs was to constitute the basis for that common front that united the new group of poets who began to come to the fore precisely towards the beginning of the 50s. The passing of time permitted these young poets to enhance their insights and justify their aesthetic convictions. By the advent of the 60s what we find is quite clearly a common denunciation of the social converted into a *tendency* (as opposed to one of so many legitimate motives in poetry).

It was their manner of critically rebelling against the so-called "thematic formalism" imposed by the social. In that formula, which gained success as the target of the young poets' attack, one censured a new and curious modality of rhetoric put into practice by the "sociales": the imposition and mechanization produced in that tendency, not via the formal structures (as is usually the case), but rather via the goodness or justice of the themes—that is, via the content—accepted in an exclusive fashion by the servants of this social tendency. In response to this phenomenon, one of the young

poets exclaimed in an insightful diagnosis: "So many just themes, so many unjust poems."

Very briefly, the Generation of the 50s postulated: 1) that the poet's true commitment is to poetry itself; this is a stance which in no way excludes civic engagement (here there were also socially critical poets), although social commitment is nonetheless favored only if it is exercised from the vantage point of the individual's own responsibility and non-transferable experience, and not from a position that is masterless or "choral"; 2) that before being communication, poetry—the poem—is an act or method of knowledge in depth, of discovery or integral revelation, of reality experienced and lived (with which notions such as "poetry of discovery" and "poetry of experience" came to be intimately associated, and at the same time came to be considered as defining labels of the new movement); 3) that the greatest thematic breadth, practiced now with a revival of subjectivity (and of intimacy), furthered the task of totalizing inquiry which is always favored by a poetry not directed at a limited cause (with a predominance here of the ethic or moral mode, which was dominant in the generation, but also encompassing metaphysical restlessness, the treatment of amorous or even erotic experiences, and personal versions of historic commitment); 4) that poetry is essentially—it cannot otherwise be produced—a personalized modification of language, an individualized empowering of common speech. The achievement of a deep and personal style thus became the central objective of these poets as creators and not merely as "amateur writers." Hence the very rich variety and distinctiveness of their voices and of their styles.

Strictly speaking, these aims were not new; in every age they are the constants of genuinely valid poetry. But the unanimous energy with which all of the members of this group dedicated themselves to such aims gave their common effort a stamp of novelty, and, above all, of undeniable historic opportunity. With the work of these poets—who are already viewed as the "classics" of our present—there begins the definitive rise of post-Civil War Spanish poetry. And curiously, with them there also concludes the *posguerra* (post-war period). Those who arrive on the scene shortly afterwards—since a new group was already at the point of appearing—were born after the Civil War; neither the remembrance nor the recreation of that experience will appear in their works. The label *posguerra* disappears at this moment, and will not be applicable in any way to these future new poets.

Criticism has concentrated its greatest interest, and justifiably,

on five of those poets who came to the fore in the 50s and at the beginning of the 60s: Francisco Brines, Jaime Gil de Biedma, Angel González, Claudio Rodríguez, and José Angel Valente. But, and with no excess of generosity, many—indeed very many—other names must be accorded a place within the catalogue of this group. With the inclusion of several which on account of their uneven or late rhythm of publication are frequently omitted, a selection of these names would consist of the following: María Victoria Atencia, Carlos Barral, José M. Caballero Bonald, Eladio Cabañero, Alfonso Costafreda, Angel Crespo, Ricardo Defarges, Aquilino Duque, Jaime Ferrán, Gloria Fuertes, Antonio Gamoneda, José Agustín Goytisolo, Félix Grande, Manuel Mantero, Mariano Roldán, César Simón, Carlos Sahagún. The list could be extended. It must furthermore be pointed out (although space is lacking here) that within this list it is important to establish a hierarchy of these poets.

Following our expository scheme, which alternates descriptions and amendments, in our consideration of this generational level we must offer two reservations or corrections. One is strictly chronological. These poets have been grouped together under the rubric of the “generation” or “*promoción*” (phase or movement) of the 50s, or else they have simply been called “the poets of the 50s.” Such denominations refer only to the publication dates of their first books. Nonetheless, what actually predominated in the decade of the 50s, and, as has been said, in an almost absorbing manner, was social poetry (this decade was in fact the “golden period” for this trend). The actual time of fullness and critical cohesion of the poets we are now considering was produced in the 60s. However, their work has continued—in many cases with a rich and varied evolution—up to our present moment.

The other rectification is of an evaluative nature and may imply an act of injustice. The general traits of this group’s poetics to which we have referred possess the advantage of having been adopted almost unanimously by all of its members; hence they would seem valid for a generic characterization. Nevertheless, this does not allow us to suppose that the poetry of experience and the poetry of discovery were the “inventions” or the exclusive properties of these poets. Such an assumption would imply that these modalities—expressible in two terms: *conocimiento* (knowing or discovery) and *experiencia* (experience)—had not been attempted simultaneously, or in fact previously, by poets of other generations. Two examples

(and there are many more) should suffice to illustrate the contrary. A work by Luis Rosales (a "poet of 36"), *La casa encendida* (*The House in Flames*) whose first version appeared in 1949, was already definitively a poetry of experience. José Hierro's *Cuanto sé de mí* (*As Much as I Know about Myself*, 1957) is in its title, but above all in its style and motives, poetry of intimacy and poetry of knowing (besides which Hierro himself, having outgrown his brief period of social criticism, declared continually and tenaciously during the 50s that he understood poetry as an exercise in self-knowledge).

These annotations should also indicate the dangers implicit in the application of the generation method if the observer or interpreter focuses his or her attention *solely and exclusively* on that which a generation is carrying into effect within the historic period of its irruption and consolidation while ignoring the total context of such a period.

We have seen that, towards the end of the 60s, a poetry of a very high level had gained a definitive footing within the Spanish literary panorama. And this occurred—and this must be reiterated, in order not to commit an injustice—thanks to the growing and innovative work of those poets of the so-called generation of the 50s. But with regard to this effort to excel we must also consider the important contemporary contributions of poets belonging to much earlier *promociones*: from the great master, Vicente Aleixandre (as well as Rafael Alberti and Gerardo Diego) to the latest books of the above-mentioned José Hierro and Carlos Bousoño (to cite only the most significant authors).

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Nevertheless, during these same years—towards the end of the 60s—and in the heat of that vigorous youthful thrust which that decade favored in the entire Western world, there arose a new group whose passionate gestures were those of extreme and radical rupture. Indeed rupture was their patron saint and watchword. This new orientation first made itself felt in the pioneering works of two of these young poets—*Arde el mar* (*The Sea is in Flames*, 1966), by Pedro Gimferrer, and *Dibujo de la muerte* (*Outline of Death*, 1967) by Guillermo Carnero—which were in fact two unsurpassed exemplars of the nascent aesthetic. Nonetheless, the latter was not codified until the appearance of the anthology *Nueve poetas novísimos españoles*

(*Nine Most New Poets*), compiled and provided with a prologue by José María Castellet in 1970. Even this codification seems provisional today.

In general these new poets were animated by a basic drive towards negation and iconoclasm: they rejected unreservedly—and unjustly—the entire immediate past of post-war poetry. On the other hand they proclaimed their direct affinity with the modern tradition, which they believed had been interrupted by the Civil War. Thus they turned their attention towards the poets of Spanish modernity (those of the Generation of 27, especially in their surrealist phase). But above all they turned towards the great names of universal modernity, particularly the French and Anglo-Saxons: Mallarmé, Pound, Eliot, Wallace Stevens. Or else they turned to those they considered as most advanced in Spanish America: Oliverio Girondo, José Lezama Lima, Octavio Paz, and others.

Positively, they launched what they called a “dominant aesthetic”—which fortunately became diffuse, or, rather, diversified, shortly afterwards. This aesthetic, which was of a syncretic nature—a new and eclectic use of the previous materials of modernity—was defined in its most important aspects by the following tendencies and attitudes: blockage of the expression of the self (that is, a masking of the poetic subject), extreme aestheticism or preciousness, culturalism, neo-rationalism, ciphered and personal hermeticism, exploration (even destruction) of language itself, metapoetic commentary within the poem, the utilization of elements from mass media and *camp* sensibility (and this aspect was the most provocative at the time but also the most short-lived). In this rapid enumeration one can especially appreciate these young poets’ re-evaluation of two consecrated modern traditions: modernism and vanguardism. Of course such ingredients varied in dose from one poet to another. Nevertheless as a whole they came to constitute a very inflexible “code,” which in the long run could only stifle or drown out a distinct and personal voice.

These same poets later became aware of this fact. Very soon, between 1974 and 1975, that is, before the end of that minimum of fifteen years supposedly required for the consolidation of a generation, these “novisimos” (the name, still in use, was given to them with the appearance of that 1970 anthology which had launched them with such patent publicity) began to relax the ardent profession of rupture and iconoclasm that had marked the rise of the movement. In his own



way each of these poets came to understand that the radical distancing which they had first proposed—between experience and poetry, and between life and language—would have to be attenuated. Thus, their poetic task would now admit (although without totally renouncing their original aesthetic principles) the expression of the first parts of those two options given above: experience and life.

At the moment when this occurs, the so-called *novísimo* generation can rightly deserve the label *promoción del 70*. This is not simply a question of nomenclature. Because this turn of affairs contributed to the liberation of poetic creation from that subtle form of censorship which, as we have seen above, had been exercised by the implacable code of the *novísimos* only shortly before (Spaniards tend to be very much inclined to censorship, be it political, ideological, or aesthetic). Thanks to this new openness, one could see that numerous voices which were at first cut off by the rigorous norms of the *novísimos* had been able to achieve such values as authenticity and quality.

Before proceeding, we may pause to consider those *novísimos* of the first phase. Besides the above-mentioned Gimferrer and Carnero, Castellet accepted only the following in his anthology: Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Antonio Martínez Sarrión, José María Álvarez, Félix de Azúa, Vicente Molina Foix, Ana Maria Moix, and Leopoldo Maria Panero. But if we peruse other anthologies or even personal publications, we realize that there are many more poets who cannot be omitted from the list of the Generation of 70 (indeed several have produced more solidly and sustainedly than some of those hastily grouped together by José María Castellet): Antonio Carvajal, Antonio Colinas, Marcos Ricardo Barnatán, Luis Alberto de Cuenca, Justo Jorge Padrón, Juan Luis Panero, Andrés Sánchez Robayna, Jaime Siles, Jenaro Taléns, Jorge Urrutia, Luis Antonio de Villena. As we advance chronologically through the decade of the 70s in search of those poets who would seem to announce the trends of the 80s, we find a number of names that cannot go unmentioned: Amparo Amorós, Francisco Bejarano, Pureza Canelo, Dionisio Cañas, Clara Janés, Ana Rossetti.

In this return to poetry of life and experience to which we referred above, the *novísimos* and the poets of the 70s in general finally—and not at so late a date—drew closer to those who had been the young masters of the 50s. This development is accompanied by a parallel one, which could be characterized by a response of the 50s



generation to the lesson of the younger poets who followed them. During the 70s and the 80s, we perceive in these members of the 50s generation, who had always been excellent poets, the unfolding of techniques they had begun to display earlier. We now find in these poets a heightened awareness of the poem as an act of language, but of a language that becomes more and more open and plural and that engenders poetry itself. This would imply—and this had been one of the keys of *novísimo* poetics—a greater distancing (and consequently, a lesser literal and univocal relation) between experience and the poetic word, although the former would always remain the departure point. By means of irony, of intertextual play, and of the most intense symbolic density (or inversely, but with analogous results: through the most rigorous *ascesis*), what these 50s generation poets reaffirm is a more lucid linguistic consciousness of the poetic task. In short: one now attempts to place the emotional effect of the poem in the internal interaction of its multiple semantic and linguistic planes, or in the suggestive and secret virtuality of the word. Noteworthy cases of this trend can be found in the latest poetry of a number of 50s generation poets: Francisco Brines, J. M. Caballero Bonald, Angel González, José Angel Valente.

This brief exposition of ways of coming together leads us once again to a questioning of the generational scheme. This may be formulated as follows: situated in this period—the decades of the 70s and 80s—and keeping in mind the more advanced production of the poets of the first of the two *promociones* outlined here—can we still be convinced today by any attempt to establish a rigid delimitation between the groups of the 50s and 70s? A thread of continuity, more than a rhythm of fragmentation and opposition, is, I believe, what gives the present situation of Spanish poetry its tension and character.

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Through this pathway of continuity and of generational approximations or confluences we arrive at a stage—the last in our survey—where all this culminates and is accentuated. We said before (and it must now be repeated) that around 1975 some of the most fervent of the early practitioners of *novísimo* aesthetics took a turn towards a type of poetry where experience and life recovered their legitimate rights. Via analogous paths and at the very same moment there begin to appear the first books of another wave of young poets.

These books reaffirm the reaction indicated above, although their authors are more liberated from the culturalism and extreme aestheticism which the *novísimos* had imposed on themselves and never entirely abandoned. Since it was not until the following decade that the publications of these new authors would see the light of day with greater regularity, their names thus becoming even more familiar, and as at this time other contemporary poets equally begin to make themselves known, today all of them are being referred to as "the poets of the 80s." Other denominations have been proposed which would appear less acceptable: for example, that of "*postnovísimos*," because this would suggest dependance and continuity. The latter, as suggested by such an unnuanced denomination, is exactly the contrary of many of the goals of the young poets. This is because the continuity—not merely continuism—which they have assumed was practiced from an act born out of their absolute creative liberty. It is therefore a valid right, as would not have been true of a mere mimetic tracing originating in impotence or routine.

In any case their continuity would not be practiced with respect to their immediate predecessors, the *novísimos*, from whom they would seem rather to want to distance or differentiate themselves. Some of these new poets are almost contemporaneous with the *novísimos* (who in fact had themselves begun to break away from the extreme position of their early aesthetics). What these latest poets now propose is more ostensibly that to which we have referred: the definitive incorporation of experience—indeed of everyday experience—into the poem. Consequently for many, poetic expression is now grounded in conversational language. In some this gesture is accompanied by a more emotive and immediate charge of lyricism; they find it almost unnecessary to resort to the culturalist disguise of the poetic subject and for this reason in fact achieve a higher level of communicability.

Of course we are speaking here in very general terms. What is certain is that other directions are not lacking among these young poets. For example there is minimalist poetry—otherwise known as "poetry of silence"—which would represent the case furthest removed from the opposite communicative tension that we have just described. We can also discover in these poets the cultivation of irony and even the most deliberate prosaism, and, in not a few, a meditative and interiorizing mode. We also find a willful appropriation of traditional Spanish rhetoric. This is another trait that distinguishes them

from the *novísimos*, who had busied themselves with the incorporation of foreign models; those following them will look more towards the national tradition, including its most frequently employed strophic and metrical patterns. Nevertheless, there is a danger in this orientation from which these young poets do not always escape: the poem sustained solely on formal perfection and on good writing style (the well-written poem with counted syllables), but bearing only a poor or redundant poetic thought.

This great variety, to which we have here only alluded (or even simplified) renders improbable any attempt at a unitary or satisfactory diagnosis. The impressive diversity (of lines, tendencies, and modes) can no longer be easily surveyed. This phenomenon is accompanied by that politics of decentralization (administrative and cultural) which has prevailed in Spain since the death of Franco. This, while not at all objectionable in itself, conspires even more against the possibility of any sort of totalizing vision that we could view as valid or convincing. The proliferation of regional publishing houses and journals which has followed in the wake of this decentralization also contributes to such an impossibility. In any case, those wishing to orient themselves in this vast and diffuse scenario of today's young Spanish poetry may consult the anthologies on the period by Luis Antonio de Villena and José García Martín as well as Amparo Amorós's article (pertinent information concerning these sources is provided in the bibliography at the end of this study).

It will not be necessary to insist that here the risk of specifically naming examples becomes even greater. In spite of this risk, it can be affirmed that the following poets are the best known and to a greater or lesser extent the most widely discussed by the critics: Blanca Andreu, Leopoldo Alas, Felipe Benítez Reyes, Javier Egea, Vicente Gallego, Luis García Montero, Jon Joaristi, Julio Llamazares, Miguel Mas, Alvaro Salvador, Javier Salvago, Andrés Trapiello. What typifies this list is omission rather than inclusion: the blame must be placed on provisionality and lack of perspective.

As a whole and speaking in more general terms, one does not usually encounter in these young poets that deliberate and frequently excessively ostentatious brilliance that the *novísimos* had displayed since their earliest days. Neither does one find their initial (and relative) aesthetic homogeneity. But this same provisionality to which we have referred gives rise to a series of questions with respect to this particular moment in Spanish poetry, which indeed only time can

answer. We may for instance ask the following: Does continuity, assumed as consequent to a voluntary and personalized acceptance of tradition in and of itself, render fruits inferior to those proceeding from novelty? Is diversification, which some think leads to richness, actually more dangerous than homogeneity?

The term *continuity* sends us back to something that was only suggested in previous paragraphs. This is the fact that the dialectic between several *promociones* (a dialectic which now takes on more of the character of a superposition or coinciding between generations) complicates even further at the present moment the validity of the generational method for evaluative and historical clarification. This is so because these 80s poets, who display traits analogous to the second *novísimo* movement (with which they coincide in general and chronologically) manifest on the contrary an adherence to the aesthetics of the 50s. The growing and rightful re-evaluation of these 50s poets now taking place in Spain is in fact due to the efforts of some of these young poets. But in what concerns these 80s poets and their creative task, this re-evaluation does not signify an attempt at an archeological reconstruction of the diction (or the dictions) of their "grandfathers" (the 50s group). Rather it would represent, to judge from the declarations of some of these younger poets, something of greater richness and range: a liberation from the until then prevalent *novísimo* atmosphere. It would also represent the discovery of a world, that of the masters of the 50s, which although not their own, nonetheless gave them a wide margin for the creation of their personal worlds. Creative liberty was thus privileged above the aesthetic norm.

From the foregoing facts we may draw a conclusion, however tentative it may be. Perhaps the Spanish poets of the last three *promociones* perceive things differently from the vantage point of their enclosed and provincial milieu (the Spanish literary scene, above all lived from within, has never been able to totally disengage itself from provincialism). But the distant observer, possessed of that greater objectivity that distance always allows, perceives a greater continuity between these generations. He also perceives more affinities and proximities than ruptures, gaps and differentiations. This can be said without attempting to deny the absolute originality of these poets' more personal voices.

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I believe I have carried out, in however cursory a manner, that which I proposed at the very beginning of this survey: to employ the generational sequence as a narrative prop, while at the same time progressively calling into question its validity as a unique methodology for achieving an exact interpretation of what was described. To this end I have attempted to point out its defects and disorientations whenever appropriate. And I would be glad if this were in fact the last attempt to apply this scheme comprehensively to the richly varied panorama of contemporary Spanish poetry. Already two supposed generations of our century—those of the years 98 and 27 respectively—have been more or less discredited. But I am not so optimistic: I know that most likely inertia will gain the upper hand (for the time being).

Nevertheless, the above discussion has not completed our task. If there are doubts about a method, there naturally arises the necessity of proposing another (or others). My final considerations are dedicated to this purpose.

One of these possible methods, which I will mention briefly, would be that of organizing the study and systematization of this fruitful period by tracing and defining the successive “poetic stages of time” (or “stages of poetic time”) that have been produced in the course of a continuous unfolding of poetic creation. In all of these we would have to underline the historical conditionings and dominant aesthetics (or the various coexistent aesthetics, if we would avoid simplifications). This would have to be done independently of generational considerations, although with the recognition that as always and in each of these stages (or states) the younger poets seem to prefer thrust and novelty. But it is necessary to give equal credit to poets of other *promociones* who convey analogous meanings and modulations or who, on the contrary, offer an always healthy diversity for the variety and richness of this same period. This is what I have attempted to suggest in the present study through my successive modifications of generational patterns. If at this point I only allude to this useful and needed systematization, it is because I see that fortunately it has already been followed by Víctor García de la Concha in his book *La poesía española de 1935 a 1975* (at the time of writing this work is still in progress; only two of the three volumes of which it will eventually consist have appeared). I shall devote more space to the second possible methodology, which I consider not only appropriate but also indispensable.

Earlier I employed two terms: *diversity* and *continuity*. I perceive in these tensions several clues which can lead to a broader revisionist process which has become imperative to Spanish literary historiography. To begin with, one must remove the latter from the endogamous treatment to which it has generally been subjected. Consequently (and if we overcome again Spanish particularism) one could attempt once and for all to situate this historiography on the same level as the appraisals and speculations that predominate in other Western literatures. I am referring specifically to the possibility of applying the aesthetic-cultural concept of *postmodernity* to contemporary Spanish poetry *as of* a certain moment, or as of a certain phase of necessary incubation or preparation. In such fashion one would achieve what I have just indicated, that is, to universalize the critical appreciation of what Spaniards themselves erroneously insist on viewing as a unique and "peculiar" case: their own art and culture. In the specific *genre* of poetry such a perspective would be most helpful in allowing us to emerge from the generational cross-roads.

Generally speaking, for the average Spanish public, who began to hear this word only some ten years ago, the "postmodern" is synonymous with something bizarre, extravagant, ostentatious, and perhaps only amusing and scandalous. At best in the more serious circles—for instance, artistic and critical ones—one associates it with irony, parody, *pastiche*, and the aesthetic utilization of the commonplace. It is certain that the latter notions are quite relevant and that they do enter into this aesthetic, but they do not sum it up in a defining or exclusive manner. Postmodernity is in fact a much broader phenomenon. In synthesis, it would serve as a common designation for an entire cultural-historical period (as well as a sociological, scientific and economic one). It is a period that at once defines and modifies the ideological and aesthetic climate—generally idealistic—that reigned in the thought and art of modernity.

Postmodernity is actually something more serious and radical than *pacotilla* (a superficial, casual venture) (although it may be the fault of some of its more avid propagators that this lack of critical focus has been produced in Spain). There are still some intellectuals in the country, some of them quite prominent, who can only see it as that (as *pacotilla* art) and become irate at the mere mention of the word, without wishing to know anything of its true implications. Nevertheless, in the strict (and broad) sense to which I have briefly alluded, during the course of more than three decades this same notion



of postmodernity has been subject to rigorous theoretical considerations outside the borders of Spain (although these are also beginning to appear within the Peninsula itself). Referring to several of these considerations, a number of reflections would be relevant to the poetic developments discussed here.

Whether one focuses the idea of postmodernity from a broad cultural position (as does the German Jürgen Habermas), or from a specifically epistemological perspective, as in the case of the Frenchman Jean-François Lyotard—who subtitles his seminal book *La Condition Postmoderne: Rapport sur Le Savoir* (*Report on Knowledge*)—or rather from a politico-social position, as with the North American Marxist Fredric Jameson (who apprehensively views the postmodern mentality as an extreme manifestation of “late capitalism”): on the two points on which I base my final reflections, all these theorists are entirely in agreement.

The postmodern condition favors syncretic, pluralist, and integrating aesthetics as opposed to the ideal of extreme originality and novelty, which in modernity led to the rejection of all immersion in tradition. It has been said that for the postmodern artist the past has ceased to be a burden to be avoided. On the contrary, this past has become a box of treasures which can be utilized by the artist to his best advantage. Furthermore—and importantly—this aesthetic is also open to the very elements of modernity that can now be recycled, whether this be from a parodic perspective or not. This openness is projected towards both the high and the low, the exquisite and the everyday. The boundaries between elitist and “popular” art are thus placed under erasure, and consequently as a whole this conciliating and syncretic character frightens the partisans of exclusively sophisticated and minority art forms.

Within criticism on art and literature in Spain, a number of steps have been taken towards an adaptation of the ample and comprehensive understanding of postmodernity as an approach to the appraisal of the poetry produced in that country during the last few decades. The oldest of these is Carlos Bousoño’s fundamental study entitled “Poesía contemporánea y poesía postcontemporánea.” The original journal publication date of this essay is 1964, which must be kept in mind in order to understand why the author could not advance further in his diagnosis and why his “postcontemporaneidad” does not fully coincide with what we understand today by postmodernity (it has been rightly pointed out that some of the traits Bousoño attributes to



the "postcontemporary" category are still directly indebted to modernity). Afterwards there appears an alerting article, "La Posmodernidad Cumple Cincuenta Años en España" ("Fifty Years of Postmodernity in Spain," 1985), where the author, Dionisio Cañas, concludes that the label *posguerra* is inadequate and that the term postmodernity is more valid and exact for encompassing the Spanish artistic production which began around 1935. He supports his proposal with solid arguments, although not in great detail (this is a journalistic article and not a fully developed essay). His new periodization for the poetry of these years is superior to the one usually accepted, but calls for greater precision and elaboration. Recently Andrew Debicki has written a series of studies based on the most direct and specific observation of poetic phenomena (tendencies, modes, and texts) of this same period. These studies have shed a great deal of light on the necessary path towards the acceptance and more rigorous application of the concept.

No stage in art or literature is attained all at once or in one leap: rather it is reached through a gradual process. What Debicki's essays attempt is precisely to follow such a process. Therefore, if a gradual collapse of modern poets is already perceived towards the middle of our century (that is, in the second post-war group, in the 50s), it will not be until the rise of *novísimo* aesthetics, and its derivatives, when the above-mentioned critic will find what he or she fully considers the defining elements of postmodern poetics. Among these are the following: the creation of an indeterminate and open text (not fixed or stable in itself), the claim to the indispensable collaboration of the reader in the production of the poem, the multiple presence in the text of several levels of meaning and linguistic registers, the presence of intertextualities and self-referentiality (what in other terms is referred to as "metapoetry").

It should be underscored that the pivot of Debicki's thesis, with its exact examination of the passage from modernity to postmodernity in poetry, rests on the conception of the poem as defended and practiced by the authors of the two literary periods. For the first, the "moderns," the literary work was to exhibit a coherent structure that would correspond to a single definable meaning. On the other hand what would distinguish the "postmoderns" would be the simultaneity of diverse planes of language and of perspectives that never achieve resolution in a unitary and exclusive meaning. The readers themselves have to work out these levels which the author voluntarily

leaves unarticulated, in order to arrive at some conclusion if such is possible (or necessary). It could be argued nonetheless that the conviction that a “modern” poem always encloses a single and stable meaning is open to reservation and debate.

In the light of that proposed by Cañas and Debicki, I should like to add—albeit provisionally and very rapidly—two further reasons that could support this same appraisal of postmodernity in contemporary Spanish poetry. One, still external and general, would call attention to the fact that postmodernity is, as we said above, defined in terms of pluralism and diversity (as much as in the acceptance, be it ironic or literal, of any past expressive modality). If this is admitted, isn’t this what is offered not only by the marked diversity of the poets of the 80s, but also by the confluence of all three generations of contemporary Spanish poetry? In the pages of a single literary magazine, and proceeding from poets of sundry generational extraction, one can today read the most classical of sonnets alongside a piece organized around an extreme level of experimentation, or a ciphered or hermetic text next to another employing plain or even prosaic language; we can find an “essentialist” mini-poem beside an extensive anecdotal and semi-narrative composition, or a grave and deep meditation supplying counterpoint to a purely ludic or even parodic exercise. And it should not be forgotten that the very originality attributed to the *novísimos*, their gesture of rupture, was supported entirely on recycling (even if from an ironic and skeptical perspective, in many cases, although not in all) of expressive material of modernity, from *modernismo* to vanguardism and surrealism. Their originality consisted precisely in their syncretism, rather than in the specific aesthetic character of those ingredients employed in such syncretism.

Our second argument, which points more towards the interior of the poetic phenomenon, would have to be formulated from the use of *récit* as the pivot of poetic structuring, which indeed is nothing foreign to the last fifty years of Spanish poetry. Here we must think of the thesis of Jean-François Lyotard, which convincingly underscores the significance of narrativity in all fields of culture, from the most technical and scientific to the most artistic and pedagogical. In his above-mentioned text there is a fundamental chapter, titled “Pragmatics of Narrative Knowledge” in the Spanish version. Here the author’s observations on art and literature will give the impression to one versed in contemporary Spanish poetry of being based (at least in

part) on the diversely nuanced practice of narrative discourse by many poets of the 50s Generation—above all Francisco Brines, Jaime Gil de Biedma, and Angel González. We also think of the earlier *La casa encendida*, of Luis Rosales (a “poet of 36”) and of many texts by José Hierro, of the following group. If Lyotard knew the Spanish language (which is probable) and if he read these poets, his reaction (which is more probable) would be affirmative from his own perspective.

I repeat: these last considerations should be taken as highly provisional. The only virtue I lay claim to for them is good faith. That is to say, they are based on my good intention of opening a few gaps that will allow us to emerge from the dead end alley in which we are left by the mechanical application of the generational method to the Spanish poetry of the last fifty years. In my general course I have not deviated from this method: homage. At the same time, I have indeed questioned and undermined it: criticism. It may be said that my attitude has been ironic and ambiguous. But I believe that ambiguity and irony will always produce the most suggestive and open results—which are desirable in these postmodern times—as opposed to an impossible, pedantic, and absolute certainty.

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The closing date of the title of this study (1989) refers only to the last year of poetry which I could have considered during the time of its writing (the summer of 1990). I have wished to give this essay the open-ended and informative tone of one who only proposed to *narrate* the poetic adventure in Spain during this fifty-year period. In order not to interrupt this narrative thread I have reduced my supply of quotations and references to a minimum. In compensation, I add here a list of references, divided into two sections: 1) *several anthologies of the period*, in many of which those interested may find useful and interesting preliminary studies as well as particular bibliographies on the authors included; and 2) a minimal selection of *critical studies* on themes and tendencies important to the same period.

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